An Extension to
The Textbook of Digital Photography

Buying a Camera

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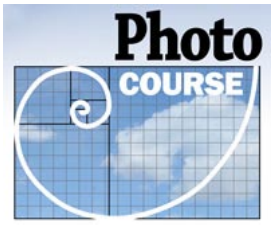

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Buying a Camera and Other Equipment

Buying a digital camera or other photographic equipment can be confusing at best. Here are some of the rules of the game and places where you can do more homework right from your desktop. Why drive from store to store or fight the crowds at photo shows when you can just click your way around the digital-imaging world?

Think about your interests

If you're buying a digital camera for the first time, you can quickly get lost in the details—there are lots of them. However, before looking at specifics, you should think through how you want to use the camera and its photos.

• Will you be shooting indoors? This will determine the quality of the flash you need.

• Will you be photographing static scenes such as home interiors, or action shots such as sports? This will determine the best viewfinder and lens.

• Will you be photographing wide angle scenes such as landscapes and home interiors, telephoto scenes such as portraits, or close-ups such as flowers, stamps and coins? This will determine the focal length of the lens you need and whether you need a zoom lens, auxiliary lenses, or macro mode.

• Are you a casual user, or a serious amateur or professional photographer? This will help you determine how many manual controls you'll want.

• Will you print the photos as snapshots, enlargements, or embed them in word processed or desktop published documents? Or will you publish the images on a Web page, e-mail them to others, or include them in a presentation? This will determine the best resolution for your situation.

Decide about size

One way to think about cameras is to divide them into those that fit in your shirt pocket and those that don't. This is really a key decision because those that don't fit in your pocket hang around your neck. The larger cameras may offer more features but will you want to carry them with you? There are a few cameras that fall somewhere between the extremes and will fit in a coat pocket or purse, so you may want to consider one of those if you remain undecided.

Decide about lens

Most digital cameras come with a zoom lens that is built into the camera and can't be changed. The optical zoom ranges on these lenses are between 3x and 18x but ranges will increase over time. (Ignore digital zoom except for movies.) If these zoom ranges are great enough for what you plan to do, a fixed lens camera might be perfect for you. If you think you may have special needs or want the best possible optics, an SLR with interchangeable lenses might be more appropriate.

Download the manual

Nothing explains the features of a camera better than the user manual that comes with it. Many camera companies also post these on their Web sites in the PDF format. Look for the manual in the site's Support section or google

it. If you can't understand the manual, go to www.shortcourses.com to see if they have a guide to the camera. They are much clearer.

Check new model plans

Digital cameras generally go through model changes or upgrades every 18 months or so, being renamed sequentially something like 10D, 20D, 30D and so on. It helps in two ways to know when the next upgrade is expected. First, prices on the current model usually drop just before a new models comes out as stores clear out inventory. This is an opportunity to save some money, especially since the industry is maturing and changes from model to model are not as great as they once were. Second, some dealers sell old models at full price right up to and past the date new models are introduced. It's helpful if you know the true facts when negotiating a purchase. You can find information about new models on camera company Web sites in their *News* and *Press* sections and on Web sites devoted to digital camera news and reviews.

Check camera sites

Because digital cameras draw on two worlds—photography and computing, the old distinguished names in photography have been joined by a host of new competitors such as Sony and Hewlett-Packard. The result is a very crowded market. The field of digital photography is now maturing and a shake out has started. Some of the existing companies will leave the field as Konica, Kyocera and Minolta have done, unable to compete in such a fast-paced market. Until then, we will all benefit from the battle between these companies because it leads to better and cheaper cameras. It's also an enjoyable spectator sport once you have an understanding of what's going on. However, you may not want to buy a brand new camera from a company that is then bought by another company or just quits the business.

Check camera company Web site news sections. That's where you will find press releases for new cameras that are not yet listed on their Web site.

- Canon (www.powershot.com, www.canon.com)
- Casio (www.casio.com)
- Epson (www.epson.com)
- Fuji (home.fujifilm.com)
- Hewlett-Packard (www.hp.com)
- Kodak (www.kodak.com)
- Leica (www.leica-camera.com)
- Minox (www.minox.com)
- Nikon (www.nikon.com)
- Olympus (www.olympus.com)
- Panasonic (www.panasonic.com)
- Pentax (www.pentax.com)
- Ricoh (www.ricoh.co.jp/r_dc)
- Rollei (www.rollei.de)
- Samsung (www.simplyamazing.com)
- Sony (www.sony.com)
- Vivitar (www.vivitar.com)

Check discussion forums

Discussion forums are where people post messages and get responses on a wide variety of topics.

- Photo.net (www.photo.net) has been around for years and has gracefully

FEATURE CREEP

Features are being added to new cameras at an amazing rate. In fact anything that can be done, is being done. Only time will tell what features really work and which migrate from a few models to many of them. In the meantime, don't put too much emphasis on many of these features. Your buying decision should be based on the features you are sure to use and on the image quality the camera delivers.

made the transition from film to digital.

• Digital Photography Review (www.dpreview.com) is a popular site with forums on a wide variety of topics.

Check camera news & review sites

There are a number of very good news and reviews sites on the Internet. Two that have been around for a long time include the following:

• Steve's DigiCams (www.steves-digicams.com), run by Steve Sanders, is an outstanding news and reviews site

• Digital Review (www.digitalreview.ca/) is a Web site we have worked with for a long time.

Explore on-line auctions

There are people who swear by Web auctions, specifically eBay, as a way to get the lowest possible price. The problem is that sellers put together packages that benefit themselves more than you. They toss in cheap bags, lenses, filters, tripods and what all to drive up the price. If you can isolate out a private party you might get a good deal on a used camera but for new cameras stick with established dealers. If you do buy on eBay always check the seller's rating. One as high as 90% still means they leave a trail of 1 out of 10 customers unsatisfied. When buying a used SLR also be aware of the possibility that it has dust on the sensor.

Visit trustworthy stores

When buying camera equipment, it's usually a big mistake to go for the lowest price. This is where the scam artists operate. They achieve exceptionally low prices only through deceptive or consumer unfriendly practices, some of which are described in this section. All reputable dealers offer prices grouped in a very narrow range, perhaps within $10 of each others on a $400 camera. This is because the margins are so low most are selling at just above cost to be competitive. The two stores where I do 90% of my buying are:

• Amazon (www.amazon.com) isn't the best, but I love the way they give user reviews and rank sales of all camera equipment. I also love one-click buying because I don't have to find my wallet. Just be aware that Amazon lets other stores sell on their site and some of those are unbelievably bad.

• B&H Photo and Video (www.bhphotovideo.com) is the store for professionals and they take their reputation very seriously. In the small circle of professionals, bad business practices will kill a company very quickly as word gets around. It is in this discriminating market where B&H thrives. The B&H business is run by people whose religion dictates that they not do business on the Sabbath, so the store won't even take orders from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. You have to respect this way of doing business and in some cases delay your order by a day. They frequently make up for it by getting things to me long before I expect them and it's not just me, it's everyone.

Watch out for unbundling

When you buy a digital camera, the basic package almost always includes extras such as a battery charger, lens cap, batteries, and software. One of the more disreputable practices a dealer can engage in is called *unbundling*. These dealers remove items from the package and sell them separately. To

SHOP LOCALLY

There's no question that you can save a little money by shopping by mail order or over the Internet. However, keep in mind that the dealers in your local community also deserve your support. Their prices aren't always higher because they are more profitable. More likely, they are higher because their costs are higher. As often as possible, it makes sense to support your local merchants. They are part of the community you live in and your dollars circulate locally, not in a distant place you care nothing about.

find out what should be included in the package, visit the camera manufacturer's Web site and check their specifications page. The included items are almost always listed. The user's guide that comes with the camera may also list the items that should be included as part of the camera's price.

Avoid Gray Market Products

When camera companies introduce new cameras, they frequently use different product numbers, names, and prices in different markets around the world. Some dealers buy cameras in countries with the lowest prices and then sell them in another country. Since these cameras are bought and sold outside of the manufacturer's normal distribution channels, prices may be lower but you almost always lose warranty coverage and technical support.

Check Postage Rates and Sales Taxes

When purchasing a camera you have three components of the price to consider—the camera price, postage and handling, and taxes. When you purchase over the Web or by mail order from an out-of-state-company, you and not the dealer are responsible for paying state and local sales taxes. Most people aren't aware of this responsibility, or choose to ignore it. When it comes to the price and postage and handling, however, the dealer is in control. Many dealers lower the price to make the camera more attractive, then increase the postage and handling charge to boost their profits. With the popularity of Internet sites and low margins, the temptation to do this is even stronger. Be sure you check and compare these additional costs and take them into account when comparing prices. Most companies have deals with firms such as Federal Express so their costs are $10–15 or so for second day shipments. Anything over and above that is pure profit to the dealer.

Avoid Extended Warranties

Hesitate before accepting extended warranties. Every knowledgeable consumer expert I've ever read says it's better to gamble. Most of a company's profit is in the sale of these warranties so they press, and press hard. Your job is to resist, and resist hard. The only thing to keep in mind is that digital cameras can be horribly expensive to repair. The cost of a repair can equal or exceed the original purchase price. If you want peace of mind, you may want the warranty, even though it's almost certainly overpriced.

Check Return Policies, Restocking Fees

When you buy a camera from a reputable dealer, you expect to be able to return it if you aren't satisfied. Some dealers try to discourage this by charging a restocking fee for returned merchandise. This is always explained as a way to recover their costs of checking the merchandise and restoring the packaging you may have opened. If a dealer requires a restocking fee, my advice is to find another dealer.

Buy No Extras

Buy no extras without doing research. A few dealers low-ball camera prices and make their profit on the other, higher margin things they include in the "package". I can assure you that the lens cleaner, cheap camera bag, and poorly made tripod won't be worth what you are asked to pay for them.